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The United Kingdom's Contributions to Pacific Maritime Governance

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Dr. Scott Edwards, YCAPS Free and Open Indo-Pacific Fellow and lecturer at the University of Reading, examines the United Kingdom's maritime governance efforts in the Pacific, highlighting its renewed diplomatic engagement, security cooperation, and climate-focused initiatives while navigating limited regional influence and resource constraints.

The UK's Maritime Governance Objectives in the Pacific

The Pacific Island Countries (PICs) have not factored significantly in the United Kingdom's (UK) policymaking since a comparatively late wave of decolonization between 1970 to 1980. During this time, Fiji, Tonga, the Solomon Islands, Tuvalu, Kiribati, and Vanuatu gained independence. A diplomatic withdrawal from the Pacific defined policy in the early 2000s. Unlike Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean, the Pacific Islands are not explicitly featured in the 'Indo-Pacific' Chapter of the UK's National Strategy for Maritime Security. A notable omission, considering three PICs are Realm countries—sharing the same monarch as head of state—nine are a part of the Commonwealth, and the UK maintains an Overseas Territory in the Pitcairn Islands.

However, the emergence of a coherent set of objectives related to Pacific maritime governance can be seen through implementing the "Pacific Uplift"—a diplomatic rebalancing in light of growing Chinese influence in the region and the desire for a 'Global' role for Britain following Brexit. The Integrated Review Refresh in 2023 set out to deepen the UK's "engagement with PIC and regional resilience." In practice, the UK has sought to realize these objectives by engaging with and utilizing the Rules-Based International Order to address maritime governance issues. While UK foreign policy is currently in flux given the first non-Conservative government since 2010, this emergent policy is likely to largely continue due to its linkages with broader UK goals in the Indo-Pacific, namely, to maintain a free, open, and secure Indo-Pacific, and promote and uphold UNCLOS.

Improved climate governance has emerged as a distinct objective in the UK's approach and is likely to see a substantial degree of continuity. Much of the UK's discourse about the relationships with PIC focuses on the importance of the climate-ocean nexus. This is demonstrated through the UK's Small Island Developing States Strategy, as well as support for the Pacific Island Forum's (PIF) 'Blue Continent' strategy and Commonwealth's Blue Charter.

The UK's Key Policies and Activities

The UK's 'Pacific Uplift' policy is underscored by a growing diplomatic footprint, consisting of increasing the number of regional diplomatic posts by three and upgrading the capacity of pre-existing posts such as adding a defense section in Fiji. To support this shift, the UK has been more inclined to leverage its position in the commonwealth and as a founding dialogue partner of the PIF. Ministers for Asia and the Pacific/Indo-Pacific have visited the region across successive governments, including the most recent visit by Catherine West, as well as increasing visits by Royal Family members.

An increased diplomatic footprint has facilitated the growth of maritime security ties. Many of these ties are new bilateral partnerships, most notably the UK-Fiji Memorandum of Understanding, focusing on Fiji's maritime borders. Substantial bilateral interventions are restricted to Fiji. Other activities demonstrating this growth are undertaken through the expanded programming of the Integrated Security Fund (ISF). The ISF – previously known as the Conflict, Stability, and Security Fund - has facilitated activities such as

providing technical assistance to PICs on their Extended Continental Shelf negotiations. Looking forward, the ISF's Pacific Programme prioritizes maritime security in its 3-year 21 million British pounds sterling (GPB) funding projection. This includes work with the Pacific Community (SPC), where a three-year Integrated Ocean Management and Maritime Governance Programme has been established.

The UK has also supported multilateral programming, including recent UNDP-led activities. Of most note is the recently concluded maritime security conference in Fiji—part of an ongoing program concerned with the reform of Fiji's whole-of-government Maritime Security Committee. The UNDP, UK Government, and Fiji Government have also established a Blue Accelerator Grant Scheme (BAGS), a project incubator implementing and scaling up transformative ocean-based solutions.

Security partnerships have been assisted by the presence of two River-class Offshore Patrol Vessels (OPVs); HMS *Spey* and *Tamar*. Both were deployed in 2021 to the Indo-Pacific for a 5-year period. Beyond port visits, the vessels have primarily assisted in counter illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing-(IUU) fishing patrols and humanitarian assistance and disaster relief role.

"The UK's Pacific strategy emphasizes diplomatic agility, security partnerships, and climate-focused initiatives, leveraging historical ties and Commonwealth networks to strengthen regional engagement."

Unique Resources the UK Can Contribute to the Pacific

The UK's approach is marked by a relatively strong degree of agility and responsiveness to regional needs. In a way, this comes from necessity, given the historic lack of UK presence in the region, but it has led to an approach marked by local engagement. The UK's relatively good standing in the region, due in part to an absence of overly negative associations with its legacy, has been conducive to the success of needs-based programming. The ISF is an apt illustration of this dynamic, given its focus on enabling high-risk interventions and testing of new forms of programming, while allowing for quick responses.

As an island nation with a large and diffuse exclusive economic zone (EEZ), the UK has a lot of maritime governance expertise. While the UK should be leery of the pitfalls of offering top-down expertise in place of mutual learning, its capacity-building initiatives have been well received, especially regarding the climate-ocean nexus. The UK Hydrographic Office has shared information with Pacific island countries (PICs) to help monitor sea-level rise and erosion, as well as develop plans to support safe navigation.

Key Challenges and Barriers for the UK in the Pacific

The UK has two significant challenges to realizing a more-defined role in the region. The first is a capability gap. The two OPVs mark a limited presence in the region, and the UK is dependent on New Zealand for maritime air surveillance, even for the water surrounding British Overseas Territories (BOTs). Budget cuts under the Labour government threaten to compound those already made by the Conservative government, casting doubt on the UK's ability to provide substantial funding. According to data from the Lowy Institute's Pacific Aid Map, the UK ranked 17th among the region's donors, with funding focused on BOTs. While the ISF is an important intervention, the Pacific, even when combined with the better-funded Southeast Asia region, did not exceed 1.25% of the funds allocated by its predecessor from 2020 to 2023. Much of the ISF discourse centers on UK-security linkages, but these links are harder to justify in the distant and relatively unconnected South Pacific.

The second interlinked problem is related to the UK's ability to find unique ways to engage in a region where states already have a lot of choices from established partners. Friendly states such as Australia, New Zealand, France, and the United States are better embedded. China, too, has the resources to supply infrastructure to the PIC and is increasingly engaged, which provides a significant barrier given the UK's inability to leverage the same resources.

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